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By Capt. Judith Epstein, MC, Clinical Director of the Malaria Vaccine Program at Naval Medical Research Command



When I was 14, I was obsessed with ballet and knew I wanted to become a dancer.

Editor's Note. As Clinical Director of the Malaria Vaccine Program at Naval Medical Research Command (NMRC), Capt. Judith Epstein, MC, has been leading the Navy's effort to eradicate a disease

that annually endangers half the world's population. Dr. Epstein's journey to the world of clinical research is as fascinating as it is unexpected. Long before she first donned a white laboratory coat or Navy khakis, she was pursuing a career as a professional ballerina. As she reminds us, whether you are a scientist or dancer the concepts of vision, discipline and determination remain the same. The following is an excerpt of an oral history the BUMED History Component conducted April 4, 2014.

A Journey from Ballet Stage to Laboratory



To this day, I think discipline is very important in what we do, whether it is conducting clinical trials or anything else

When I was 14, I was obsessed with ballet and knew I wanted to become a dancer.

After I was in college for about a year, I decided that it would be better for me to drop out and do ballet. I remember going to an audition for a company run by the choreographer Agnes de Mille. [1] Although she didn't take me at first, I recall going up to her and saying, "You need to see some of the other things I can do here." I showed her some of my acrobatic moves and she finally conceded.



Agnes de Mille (1905-1993) –
Legendary dancer and choreographer.

I worked with her over a number of years, from 1974 until she passed away. And I actually got to be quite close to her—at least as much as you could be because she had a very regal presence. While working in her company I ended up being dance captain for the show *Oklahoma*. In the interim, I was in the first company doing a performance at Hunter College in New York. I remember one day that I had to do a triple pirouette on point while wearing this big costume. I was absolutely terrified that I was going to mess it up.

While I was on the stage practicing the triple pirouette over and over de Mille was in the audience talking to someone. All of a sudden I saw her slump in her chair. I then saw them place her on a stretcher and wheel her out. She had had a stroke. That show, of course, was called off. I ended up helping to take care of her over the next couple of years while she was doing her rehab and learning how to move again. And then because I knew her choreography, I used to go places with her and demonstrate it for other dancers.

Agnes de Mille was always very focused on what she was doing as a work of art, and so if you weren't doing it right she had no qualms about removing you. You were “out,” and that's it. She had loyalty to people, but her focus was on the ballet and expressing what she wanted. She had a vision, and wanted to express it in the ballet. She was the most determined person I had ever met. She'd just walk into the room and expect everybody to just part and do whatever she wanted.

To this day, I think discipline is very important in what we do, whether it is conducting clinical trials or anything else. I always say it's kind of like putting on a Broadway show. You have the dance, you have the music, you have the script, and you have the costume, now you have to bring all these people together in a way to make it all work.

At the same time I think it is important to enjoy the process, and try to enjoy the people that you're working with. You have to stay very focused and very calm so that everybody else will stay focused and calm. No matter what's happening, I always say, “Okay, this is a mini-crisis; it's not a major crisis. We haven't got to that yet. It's all under control; it's all going to work.” But, like Agnes de Mille, you must focus on good quality and stay true to your vision.

I'm Capt. Judith Epstein. I am Navy Medicine.

For more on the oral history program and to access collection of interview synopses please see:
<http://www.med.navy.mil/bumed/nmhistory/Pages/Oral-History.aspx>

[1] Agnes de Mille (1905-1993) – Legendary dancer and choreographer.

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